

The culture and tradition of the Kuki people

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The Kukis have numerous types of culture and tradition since their forefathers' times. They are unique, interesting, and impressive. Rice is the staple food of this people. They domesticated a number of animals, which some of them are very useful and helpful to their masters. Of these animals, *Sei* (mithun) is the most prized possession, while a dog is considered as a faithful animal.

The festivals of this people include *Lawm Sei' Neh* (a celebration by young people of the community after the season's work is over), *Chang Kut* (a celebration by the whole community after rice harvest), *Mim Kut* (related to maize harvest and similar in content to *Cha'ng Kut*), *Sa-Ai* (a celebration of a successful big game hunt of big animals), *Chang-Ai* (a celebration of bounteous rice harvest), *Hun* (an occasion of worship in ancient times), *Chawn le Han* (hosting of this occasion involved feasting and holding of sporting events) and *Ka'ngka'p* (a game in which disc-like seed is rolled) besides many others.

There were also different kinds of musical instruments to enhance these festivities. *Kho'ng-pi* (big drum), *Kho'ng-cha* (small drum), *Dah-pi* (gong), *Pe'ngkul* (trumpet), *Gosem* (bagpipe), *Theile* (flute), *Theiphi't* (whistle), *Se'lki* (horn) & *Lhe'mlhei* (a peculiar mouth instrument) are a few musical instruments. These instruments were useful not only for raising the festival spirit, but also for adding solemnity to certain serious occasions.

The folklore of the people abounds with the heroic adventures of *Galngam le Hangsai*, *Chemtatpa*, *Lengbante*, *Jamdil*, *Sangah le Ahpi* etc. The poignant romances of *Khupting le Ngambom*, *Jonlhing le Nanglhun*, *Changkhatpu le Ahshijolneng*, *Khalvompu le Lenchonghoi*; and folktales, such as *Chipinthei le Mailangkoh*, and others, represent the rich variety of the Kuki culture.

With regard to governance, *Semang* (cabinet) – the annual assembly of a Kuki village community held at the Chief's residence represents the *Inpi* (Assembly). In such an assembly, the Chief and his *Semang* and *Pachong* (cabinet members and auxiliary of *Inpi*) and all the household heads of the village congregate to discuss and resolve matters relating to the village and the community.

The land of the Kukis is blessed with rich customs and traditions. *Sawm*, a community center for boys – was the center of learning in which *Sawm-upa* (an elder) did the teaching, while *Sawm-nu* took care of chores, such as combing of the boy's hair, washing of the garments and making the beds, etc. The best students were recommended to the King's or the Chief's service, and eventually would become as *Semang* & *Pachong* (ministers) in the courts, or *gal -lamkai* (generals) in the army.

Lawm (a traditional form of youth club) was an institution in which, boys and girls engaged in social activities, for the benefit of the individual and the community. It was also another learning institution. Every *Lawm* has *lawm-upa* (a senior member), *To'llai-pao* (overseer or superintendent), and *Lawm-tangvo* (assistant superintendent).

Besides being a source of traditional learning, *Lawm* was also useful for imparting technical and practical knowledge to its members, especially with regard to farming methods, hunting, fishing, and sporting activities such as- *Kung – Kal* (high jump, especially over a choice mithun), *Ka'ng Ka'p*, *Ka'ngchoi Ka'p* (top game), *Suhtumkhaw* (javelin throw using the heavy wooden implement for pounding-de-husking-paddy) and *So'ngse* (shot put).

The *Lawm* was also a center where the young people learnt discipline and social etiquette. After harvest season, '*Lawm meet*' is celebrated with a *Lawm-se'l* (on the occasion, a mithun is slaughtered for the feast) and, as a commemoration, a pillar is erected. The event is accompanied by dance and drinking rice-beer, which sometimes continues for days and nights.

The Kuki male traditionally wore his hair in the form of a *Tuhcha* (long hair rolled up in a bunch at the nape). His clothing consisted of a *Boitong-Sangkhoh* (a half-sleeve jacket) and a *Pheichawm* (short lungi). They are renowned hunters and reputable warriors. Their hunting kit consists of *Se'llung-bawm* (a leather waist-pouch for pellets), *Se'lki meiloupai* (an animal's horn for storing gunpowder) and a knife. Watchful waiting on a *machaan* for the game also did a favorite past time hunting. Often, all kinds of traps and snares too are set.

The fishing equipment consists of *Len* (fishing net), *Bawm* (basket trap), *Ngakoi* (fishing hooks). *Ngoituh* (a method of

using dams and baskets in a flowing river), Ngalhei (draining out water) and Gusuh (a method of temporally stunning fish by using toxic herbs) were also common methods of catching fish in small streams. The Kuki men took great pride in big-game hunting and a killing of big animals was followed by somber celebration.

The Kukis believed that the big game hunted in a man's lifetime would accompany him in his after-life journey-the spirits of animals would clear the onward path for him. It was therefore believed that a man was not complete unless he was also successful in big game hunting; he would not be entitled to partake in *Lalju*, a special drink meant for those who have killed big game.

The Kuki women traditionally wore their hair in two plaits braided around the head; they wore a Nih-San (a red slip) underneath a Po'nve (a wrap-around), which was worn from above the chest. The ornaments included Bilba (earrings), Hah le Chao (bracelets and bangles), Khi (necklace), and occasionally Bilkam (a type of ring-shaped earring worn to stretch the earlobes).

Cha'ngsuh (grain-pounding), Cha'ngse'p (winnowing), Ponkhon (cloth-weaving) and looking after domestic animals were some of the daily chores of the women folk. The woven designs of the Kuki women are unique and appreciated the world over. Cha'ng-ai, the place of honor for a good harvest was given to the lady of the house. This formed the highest honor accorded to the Kuki woman. The men folk occupied themselves with cane and bamboo crafts and house building. They were blacksmiths and also engaged in carpentry and other such like jobs.

The manufacture of guns and gunpowder were a very specialized profession among the men. Twi-cha'ngsu (water mill)' and Chotle'p (a sea-saw mechanism), are some of the ingenious methods used for pounding rice with minimum use of human energy. Sawh and Ke'ngke (noise creating instruments) functioned as the scarecrow and were placed in the cultivated fields. Twisawh was another inventive contraption, which used running water from a stream making continual sounds to scare away birds and pests from standing crops.

It is known that the Kukis were in possession of some documents, inscribed on leather, known as 'Savun Lekhajo'l' (scroll). These scrolls were lost in the passage of time and along with this, the Kukis also lost their script. Therefore, there is no known Kuki script. Today, the Roman script forms the basis for Kuki literature.

Although the existence of formal learning institutions is not available, the Kukis were not unfamiliar with astronomy and astrology. They were able to study the stars and the phases of the moon and could forecast for themselves certain aspects of nature, particularly rainfall, drought and the seasons.

The legal system – arrangement of a girl's marriage, bride-price, and the Chief's administrative system, relief for widows and orphans – are elaborately and systematically defined in the Kukis' way-of-life. Traditionally, polygamy is not permissible. Capital punishment was never in practice. The maximum penalty was 'bultuh' (stockade in which the guilty was kept outside the village and provided food until death). This reflects the high ethics of the Kuki people.

The Kukis also practiced Twilut, a judicial process of judgment by going under water. Twilut is a phenomenon in which the litigants are subjected to go under water to determine the culprit. It is an ultimate and decisive recourse for cases where the normal processes of trial by court does not reach a conclusive end. In the event of resorting to twilut, certain customs are strictly adhered to.

The chief and elders of the community call upon the thempu (magic-medicine man/priest) to conduct the proceedings. For instance, in a boundary dispute, the two litigants are brought into the presence of the public. The 'thempu' then recites rituals, which includes the invocation of 'Pathen' (God), followed by the litigants being submerged in the water. The culprit becomes immediately apparent because she/he cannot remain underwater at all.

Of the two litigants, the defaulter would be in absolute agony, experiencing extreme sensations of being inflamed from within, and therefore emerge to the surface. In contrast, the innocent person able to remain under water, quite normally.

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